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ABSTRACT

Focusing on failure experiences, two studies explored the attributions of self-blame and responsibility and the motivational patterns of avoidance and increased diligence in elementary and middle school students. In the first study, 298 third through sixth grade students and 396 sixth through eighth grade students completed a self-report questionnaire to describe their attributions, motivations, and feelings following scholastic failure and misbehavior. As part of the questionnaire, students performed sentence-completion tasks and then selected their affective response to scholastic failure and misconduct from the following affects: worried, depressed, ashamed, frustrated, mad at themselves, sad, mad at someone else, and shamed by someone else. In the second study, which used a simplified version of the original questionnaire, students were assigned to an attribution and motivation group based on their response to one question. Analysis revealed that students making self-blame attributions reported lower levels of self-worth, perceived scholastic competence, and hopefulness, and greater worry about school than subjects making responsibility attributions. Students with avoidant motivational orientations reported lower ratings of the importance of academic success, scholastic competence, and hopefulness and reported greater conditionality of their fathers' support than subjects who endorsed effortful motivational orientations. Similar patterns for attributions and motivations regarding behavioral conduct were found. (MM)

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The Relationship of Self-Blame and Responsibility Attributions and Motivations, for Schoolwork and Conduct, to Self-Worth and Self-Perceptions.

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ABSTRACT

Attribution literature has focused attention on the concept of internal locus of control, for success as well as failure, especially in the academic environment. The present research makes a distinction between self-blame, the attribution of failure to a fault within the self, and responsibility, the recognition of playing a role in a failure without attributing it to a deficit in the self, in the areas of schoolwork as well as conduct. In addition, two motivational patterns, avoidance and increased diligence, were studied in conjunction with the different attributional styles. Two studies were conducted to explore the distinction between self-blame and responsibility, in elementary and middle school children. The relationship between different attributions, motivations, and affects after school failure and misconduct were explored. Subjects who made self-blame attributions reported lower levels of self-worth, perceived scholastic competence, and hopefulness, and greater worry about school than subjects making responsibility attributions. Subjects with avoidant motivational orientations reported lower ratings of the importance of academic success, perceived scholastic competence, and hopefulness and reported greater paternal conditionality than subjects who endorsed effortful motivational orientations. Similar patterns were found for attributions and motivations regarding behavioral misconduct. Self-blaming attributions in both domains were related to lower levels of self-worth and hopefulness. Self-blaming attributions and avoidance motivational orientations were also related to greater frequencies of negative self-affects. These results indicated that the type of internal attribution - self-blame or responsibility - and motivational style - avoidance and increased diligence - play important independent mediating roles in the lives of young adolescents.

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Introduction

Causal attributions have repeatedly been identified as one of the major underlying psychological processes that influence motivation, affective response to success and failure, and self-esteem (Bandura, 1977; Dweck and Elliott, 1983; Dweck and Leggett, 1989; Greenwald, 1980; Harter, 1985; Robinson and Harter, 1992; Weiner, 1974; Weisz, 1986). Early formulations of causal attributions focused on the "locus of control" construct, making a distinction between attributions of internal and external control (Rotter, 1966, Nowicki and Strickland, 1973). More recently, investigators have further differentiated these constructs. For example, internality may represent attributions to one's ability as distinct from one's effort (Nicholls, 1978, 1984, 1990). In the present study we introduce another potential distinction with regard to internal attributions for failure, namely self-blame, in which one attributes the cause of failure to deficits in the self, and internal attributions of responsibility in which one attributes failure to actions of the self, but not to deficits in the self.

While one type of responsibility - blame distinction has been made in the literature between causal responsibility and moral responsibility/blame (Fincham and Jaspars, 1980; Hamilton, 1978), we believe that the interpretation of certain findings suggests that a deficit model distinction between self-blame and responsibility might be meaningful. For example, in administering Connell's multi-dimensional measure of children's perceptions of control (Connell, 1985), Harter (1985) and Robinson and Harter (1992) discovered two patterns of particular relevance to this potential distinction. One group reported high levels of internality for both successes and failures, a pattern that Harter and Robinson interpreted as taking responsibility for both success and failures. However, another group of subjects reported much greater internality for failure than for success, a pattern that was interpreted as reflecting self-blame. However, as Harter and Robinson point out, these conclusions are only

interpretations, since nothing explicit in the items that would dictate such a distinction.

Another source of evidence from our laboratory suggest that the responsibility - self-blame distinction may be viable. On the Dimensions of Depression Profile (Harter, Nowakowski, & Marold, 1988), one subscale is defined as "self-blame". The items tapping this construct deal with whether children feel it is their fault when things go wrong for them. We discovered an interesting pattern of individual differences for children reporting relatively high levels of self-blame on this subscale. While one subgroup predictably reported low self-worth, there was also a smaller subgroup who reported relatively high self-worth, a somewhat paradoxical finding. We speculated that this second subgroup may have internalized a sense of control that was not detrimental to their self-worth, namely by taking responsibility for their actions. Once again, this speculation represents a post hoc interpretation.

In the present studies, our first goal was to operationalize the distinction between these two internalizing styles, taking responsibility versus blaming the self, in two separate domains, scholastic performance and behavioral conduct. Self-blame was defined as attributing failure to a fault or deficit within the self, whereas responsibility was defined as recognizing one's role in a failure, without attributing it to a deficit in the self. We were particularly interested in correlates such as domain-specific self-evaluations and global self-worth, as well as associated motivational orientations and affective concomitants, within samples of both elementary and middle school students.

Although the distinction between responsibility and self-blaming internalizing styles has not been introduced into the literature in this particular form, there are clearly some convergences, as represented in the work of Dweck and her colleagues (Dweck & Henderson, 1983; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Henderson and Dweck, 1990). In examining differences in the particular naive theories of

intelligence held by children, Dweck has distinguished between two types of theories. There are those children who view intelligence as a fixed "entity", namely a more trait-like characteristic of the self. In contrast, a second group, labelled "incremental" theorists, view intelligence as more malleable, leading them to pursue experiences and challenges that will increase their ability. Such children maintain their diligence on tasks despite failure. Thus, those who view their performance, particularly their failures, as due to trait-like deficiencies share features in common with our self-blaming attributional style. Those adopting Dweck's incremental stance would appear to be more similar to those displaying our responsibility attributional style.

In the present studies, we focused exclusively on failure experiences. While both success and failure have been studied in attribution research, it appears that attribution style is particularly crucial when one is faced with failure. Diener and Dweck (1978) found no differences in the approach or reaction of entity versus incremental children when they succeeded on a given task. However, under failure conditions, entity children reported negative self-cognitions, attributed failure to personal inadequacies (poor memory and intelligence), and found the task aversive. In contrast, incremental children responded to failure by engaging in self-monitoring and self-instruction, increasing effort, and maintaining a positive outlook about the task and their ability to accomplish it (Dweck and Leggett, 1988). Thus, we focused on failure experiences, since it seemed that this might maximize the differences between the self-blaming and responsibility attribution styles.

In addition to identifying subjects on the basis of attributional styles, we were also interested in distinguishing between two motivational orientations, (a) effort to improve versus (b) lack of effort or avoidance. The effort orientation included both working harder as well as attempts to get help from others in order to prevent future failure. The lack of effort orientation involved avoidance of the task

situation, based on the belief that one could not alter their attributes or behavior in order to produce a better outcome. A similar type of distinction has been offered by Dweck and her colleagues, since they have differentiated between those who, in the face of failure, withdraw in an attempt to avoid further failure, and those more mastery-oriented children who persevere in the face of failure. While the entity and incremental styles share features with our self-blaming and responsibility attributions, respectively, the present studies do not link specific motivational orientations after failure to specific attributional styles. Instead, we explored the possibility that, for some children, attributional style and motivational orientation may not follow this pattern.

The inclusion of these two dimensions, attributional style and motivational orientation, allowed for a design in which we could create four groups by crossing these dimensions. Thus, our goal was to examine the frequency of subjects, and the correlates, of the following groups: (a) self-blaming attribution coupled with the no effort/avoidance orientation; (b) self-blaming attribution combined with the effort orientation; (c) responsibility attribution style and no effort/avoidance orientation; and (d) responsibility attribution style and effort orientation. We predicted that all attribution style/motivational orientation combinations would be endorsed, although we expected that the majority of subjects would fall in groups (a), the self-blaming, no effort/avoidance combination and (d) the responsibility, effort combination.

We predicted that both attributions and motivational orientations would have unique effects on a number of correlates. Because attributions are self-evaluations, we predicted that they would have the greatest effect on self-perceptions of scholastic and behavioral competence, worry about school, global self-worth, and hopefulness. In contrast, we predicted that motivational style would be related to importance of school success, teacher approval, and the conditionality of parental support. We

hypothesized that hopefulness would be related to both attribution and motivational styles. We predicted that trait-like attributions of self-blame, i.e. making self-blame attributions in both scholastic and conduct domains, would be related to lower levels of self-worth and hopelessness than subjects making trait-like attributions of responsibility. Finally, we predicted that subjects with self-blame attributions and avoidant motivational orientations would experience more self-affects (ashamed of self, mad at self, depression, guilt) than subjects in any other sub-group.

Method

To examine this issue, we created a questionnaire asking older children (n=298; 3rd - 6th grade, 90% Caucasian, SES=middle class, approx. equal male:female ratio) and young adolescents (n=396; 6th - 8th grade, 95% Caucasian, SES=upper-lower to middle class, approx. equal male:female ratio) to report their attributions, motivations, and feelings following scholastic failure and misbehavior. In this self-report format, the children completed a series of sentence stems, such as "When I don't do well in school...," or "When I don't act the way I'm supposed to...," with the attribution, feeling, or motivational response that was most like them. The responsibility and self-blame attribution stems were written to accentuate the responsibility/self-blame distinction mentioned earlier. The responsibility attribution was stated, "I usually take responsibility for what I did, since it was my fault, but I don't feel like a bad person," while the self-blame attribution was, "I usually blame myself and think there is something wrong with me." An external attribution statement, "I usually think its not my fault," was included so that we did not force children to make an internal attribution. For motivational orientation, children chose between an effort-avoidant statement - "I usually don't want to think about or deal with my schoolwork/conduct because I can't change the way I am..." - and a effortful statement - "I usually try harder to do better by working harder or getting

help/obeying the rules or paying more attention to how I behave." Finally, children were asked to select their affective response to scholastic failure and misconduct from the following affects: worried, depressed, ashamed of myself, frustrated, mad at myself, sad, mad at someone else, shamed by someone else. The Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 1985), which taps five domain-specific dimensions of self-concept, the Dimensions of Depression Profile for Children and Adolescents (Harter, Nowakowski, and Marold, 1988), which examines the six theoretically derived dimensions of depression, and the Social Support Scale for Children and Adolescents (Harter and Robinson, 1988), which taps support in the form of approval from significant others, were employed to measure the dependent variables of interest in these studies.

Results

To be considered a member of a particular attribution group in the first study, subjects had to report the same attribution style on three out of the four possible questions. Overall, 74.5% of the subjects met this criterion. The second study employed a simplified version of the original questionnaire. In this study, subjects were assigned to the respective attribution and motivation group based on their response to one question, although a second question was used for reliability. The percentage of subjects reporting each attributional style and motivational orientation for each study is given in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

While very few subjects made external attributions in the first study, a sizeable minority of subjects

made external attributions in the second study. However, since no predictions were made about this group, it was not included in any further analyses.

We anticipated that those reporting self-blame attributions would be more likely to endorse an avoiding orientation, whereas those making responsibility attributions would opt for the continued effort style. The significant Chi Square ($x2$ (1, $n=240$)$=29.35$, $p<.001$) was primarily due to the fact that the vast majority of those making responsibility attributions reported the effortful motivational orientation. However, as we also anticipated, the responses to the questions regarding motivation after failure in school for each attribution style indicated that while many subjects reported the hypothesized combinations, all combinations were represented. The percentage of subjects in each of the four groups in both studies in presented in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Correlates of Attributional and Motivational Styles

We hypothesized that attributions would have the most profound effect on domain-specific self-perceptions and self-esteem. We predicted that subjects making self-blame attributions about school failure would have lower levels of perceived scholastic competence, self-esteem and hopefulness, and higher levels of worry about school than subjects making responsibility attributions. With regard to motivational orientation, we hypothesized that an effortful motivational orientation would be related to higher levels of perceived teacher approval, hopefulness, and the importance of school, and lower parental conditionality than students reporting no effort motivational orientations. In the second study, we anticipated that most of these relationships would be true for both the scholastic and behavioral

conduct domains.

Overall, the pattern of predictions for attribution style, as can be seen in Figure 1, were supported. Those endorsing self-blame attributions, regardless of motivational orientation, reported lower levels of perceived scholastic competence (in both domains), self-worth, and hopefulness (in both domains), and higher levels of worry about schoolwork and higher levels of global self-worth than subjects reporting self-blame attributions.

Insert Figure 1 about here

While gender was included as a variable in the analyses, no specific predictions regarding gender were made. Given the large number of variables of interest in both studies, we were not surprised to find several gender x attributional style and gender x motivational orientation interactions. However, these interactions were neither predicted, nor systematic, and they did not qualify the main effects of either attributional style or motivational orientation.

Results from 2 x 2 x 2 (Attribution style x Motivation orientation x Gender) MANOVA's revealed significant attribution main effects for self-worth ($F(1, 182)=23.0$, $p<.001$), hopefulness ($F(1, 182)=8.52$, $p<.001$), and worry about schoolwork ($F(1, 182)=8.65$, $p<.004$). Scholastic competence only approached significance in these multivariate analyses ($F(1, 182)=2.50$, $p<.116$), although an individual ANOVA yielded a significant attribution main effect for scholastic competence ($F(236)=7.77$, $p<.006$). Although only the results from the first study are reported here, these results were replicated in the second study for the scholastic domain, and for scholastic competence and hopefulness in the conduct domain.

In addition to these predicted effects, attributional style also predicted teacher approval. Results revealed that subjects who made self-blame attributions reported lower levels of teacher approval than students who made responsibility attributions (self-blame $M=2.74$ vs. responsibility $M=3.07$). MANOVA's revealed significant univariate main effects for attributions on teacher approval ($F(1, 182)=5.30$, $p<.022$). This pattern was replicated in the second study, although differences were only marginally significant ($p<.087$ and .098).

As can be seen in Figure 2, subjects who said they would continue to try after failure also reported more unconditional support from fathers, school success was more important, they received more teacher approval, and were more hopeful (in both domains) than subjects who said they would avoid further effort after failure. Results from 2 x 2 x 2 (Attribution style x Motivation orientation x Gender) MANOVA's revealed a significant univariate motivational main effect for paternal conditionality ($F(1, 182)=5.16$, $p<.024$), perceived importance of school ($F(1, 182)=10.6$, $p<.001$). and hopefulness ($F(1, 182)=25.03$, $p<.001$). The relationship between hopefulness and scholastic motivational orientation was replicated in the second study. The differences between groups on teacher approval did not reach acceptable levels of significance ($F(1, 182)=.806$. $p<.167$) in the multivariate analyses. However, an individual ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for motivation on teacher approval ($F(1, 235)=4.46$, $p<.036$).

Insert Figure 2 about here

The motivational dimension also yielded effects on several variables initially thought to be related primarily to attributional style. Subjects with the continued effort orientation after failure had

higher levels of global self-worth and perceived scholastic competence than subjects who avoided effort after failure. 2 x 2 x 2 (Attributional style x Motivational orientation x Gender) MANOVA's indicated significant main effects of motivations for global self-worth ($F(1, 182) = 4.98$, $p < .027$) and perceived scholastic competence ($F(1, 182) = 4.06$, $p < .001$).

Attributions across Scholastic and Behavioral Domains

The inclusion of two domains, academic performance and behavioral conduct, allows us to address another issue of theoretical and empirical import. Do subjects manifest the same attributional style, as well as motivational orientation, across domains or are these dimensions likely to differ? Consistency across domains would suggest a more trait-like phenomenon, whereas differences would indicate more situation-specificity. We did not adopt a framework predicting either consistency or situation-specificity, as a general outcome. Rather, consistent with our previous work within the academic domain (Harter & Jackson, 1992), we predicted that certain individuals would report consistency across these two domains whereas other individuals would report more situation specificity. Given this perspective, we could advance predictions about the particular combinations of consistency and situation-specificity. Thus, we predicted that individuals reporting self-blame attributional styles in both domains would report lower levels of hopefulness and self-worth than those who made responsibility attributions in both domains, or than those who blamed themselves for failure in only one domain.

These hypotheses were supported. 4 x 2 (Domain attribution subgroup x Gender) MANOVA's revealed significant main effects for hopefulness ($F(3, 203) = 15.29$, $p < .001$) and self-worth ($F(3, 203) = 26.68$, $p < .001$). These findings were replicated in the second study. In addition, multiple comparisons, performed using the Tukey test at the $p < .05$ level to control for Type I error, found

significant differences between the levels of self-worth and hopefulness of subjects making responsibility attributions in both domains and those subjects making self-blame attributions in both domains or in the scholastic domain.

Insert Figures 3 and 4 about here

Attributional Style, Motivational Orientation, and Self-Affects

Finally, we were interested in the emotional concomitants of attributional style and motivational orientation. Considerable evidence now exists that the specific emotions experienced in achievement contexts is related to the types of attributions one makes about success and failure. Noteworthy are the findings of Weiner and his colleagues (Weiner, 1985; Weiner, Graham, and Chandler, 1982; Weiner, Russell, and Lerman, 1979) revealing that, for failures in particular, attributions involving lack of effort lead to shame or guilt. In contrast, if failure is attributed to others, the result will be anger, whereas if it is attributed to luck, the affect will be surprise. In addition, Diener and Dweck (1978, 1980) found that children who maintained an entity theory about intelligence experienced more negative affects such as anxiety, depression, and shame when faced with failure, while incremental children became more determined to find solutions when faced with failure. One class of emotions that were of particular interest to us were self emotions, namely feeling ashamed of the self, mad at the self, and guilty. Our previous findings have revealed that subjects displaying more internalized motivational orientations are more likely to report self-affects than are those with a more extrinsic motivational orientation, who tend to report more "externally focused emotions", e.g., anxiety, frustration, anger at others (Harter, 1992). In the present study, we were interested in how both

motivational orientation and attributional style predicted students' self-affects, in particular. We predicted that those showing a combination of a self-blaming style with the no effort/avoidance orientation would report the greatest frequency of self-affects in comparison to subjects in the other attribution/motivation groups. We hypothesized that the affective responses of self-blaming subjects would revolve around their self-deficits to a greater extent that subjects making responsibility attributions. In addition, we hypothesized that effortful motivational orientations would lessen the affective focus on any perceived self-deficits, whereas an avoidant motivational orientation would exacerbate the focus on self-deficits and increase the likelihood of negative self-affects.

Our predictions were partially supported. 57.9% of the children with self-blame attributions and no effort motivational orientations reported experiencing negative self-affects (depression, ashamed, mad at self, guilty), compared to 37.2% of children in the other attribution/motivational subgroups. However, chi-square analyses of the data only approached significance ($x2$, $p < .077$).

Conclusions. The findings from these studies have provided new insight into the relationship that internal attributional styles and motivational orientations have with many important self-related, scholastic, and behavioral variables. It appears that, for many constructs, both children's attributional styles and motivational orientations are involved in how they perceive themselves, their future, and how they are treated by others. These results have also shown that responsibility attributions and effortful motivations are strongly associated with positive domain-specific self-perceptions and self-worth, while self-blame attributions and motivations to avoid further effort are strongly associated with negative domain-specific self-perceptions. While attributions and motivations are often interrelated, e.g., the predominant associations of responsibility attributions and continued effort as well as self-blame attributions and avoiding effort motivations, this relationship does not apply to all children.

Furthermore, responsibility attributions or effortful motivations can offset, to a certain degree, the negative characteristics that seem to be associated with avoiding effort motivations and self-blaming attributions, respectively. Results from this study have also indicated that the type of affective responses can be linked to attributional style and motivational orientation. Negative self-affects are more predominant among children who blame themselves for their problems and are unwilling to try after failure than in other attribution/motivation subgroups. In addition, consistent, trait-like attributions of self-blame across domains appear to be related to lower levels of self-worth and hopefulness, while consistent attributions of responsibility are related to higher levels of self-worth and hopefulness. In addition, we found that responsibility attributions in the scholastic domain, despite self-blaming attributions in the conduct domain, were related to higher levels of self-worth and hopefulness than subjects with trait-like self-blame attributions.

It appears that attributional style and motivational orientation have both independent and additive effects on a number of significant areas in the lives of children. In addition, the self-blame - responsibility distinction is viable for understanding affective responses to failure in achievement domains. Further research is needed to explore the independent effects of each construct as well as the combined effects that different combinations of attributional style, motivational orientation, and affective response have on the abilities of children to cope with and overcome their failures and mistakes. In addition, more work is needed to understand the causal relationships between the variables used in this study and attributional style and motivational orientation. Greater understanding of such relationships make important contributions to developing attributional and motivational interventions.

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Table 1

Percentage of children endorsing each attributional style and motivational orientation.

	1	2 (Sch)	2 (Con)
Self-Blame	20.8%	11.1%	11.4%
Responsibility	79.2%	74.5%	73.2%
Avoids Effort	19.2%	13.8%	16.8%
Continues Effort	80.8%	85.9%	83.2%

Table 2

Percentage of children endorsing each attributional style and motivational orientation combination.

	1	2 (Sch)	2 (Con)
1. Blame self/avoid effort	9.6%	3.04%	1.7%
2. Blame self/continue effort	11.2%	8.11%	9.79%
3. Responsible/avoid effort	9.6%	6.08%	9.45%
4. Responsible/continue effort	69.6%	68.90%	64.20%

Figure 1
Main Effects for Attributional Style

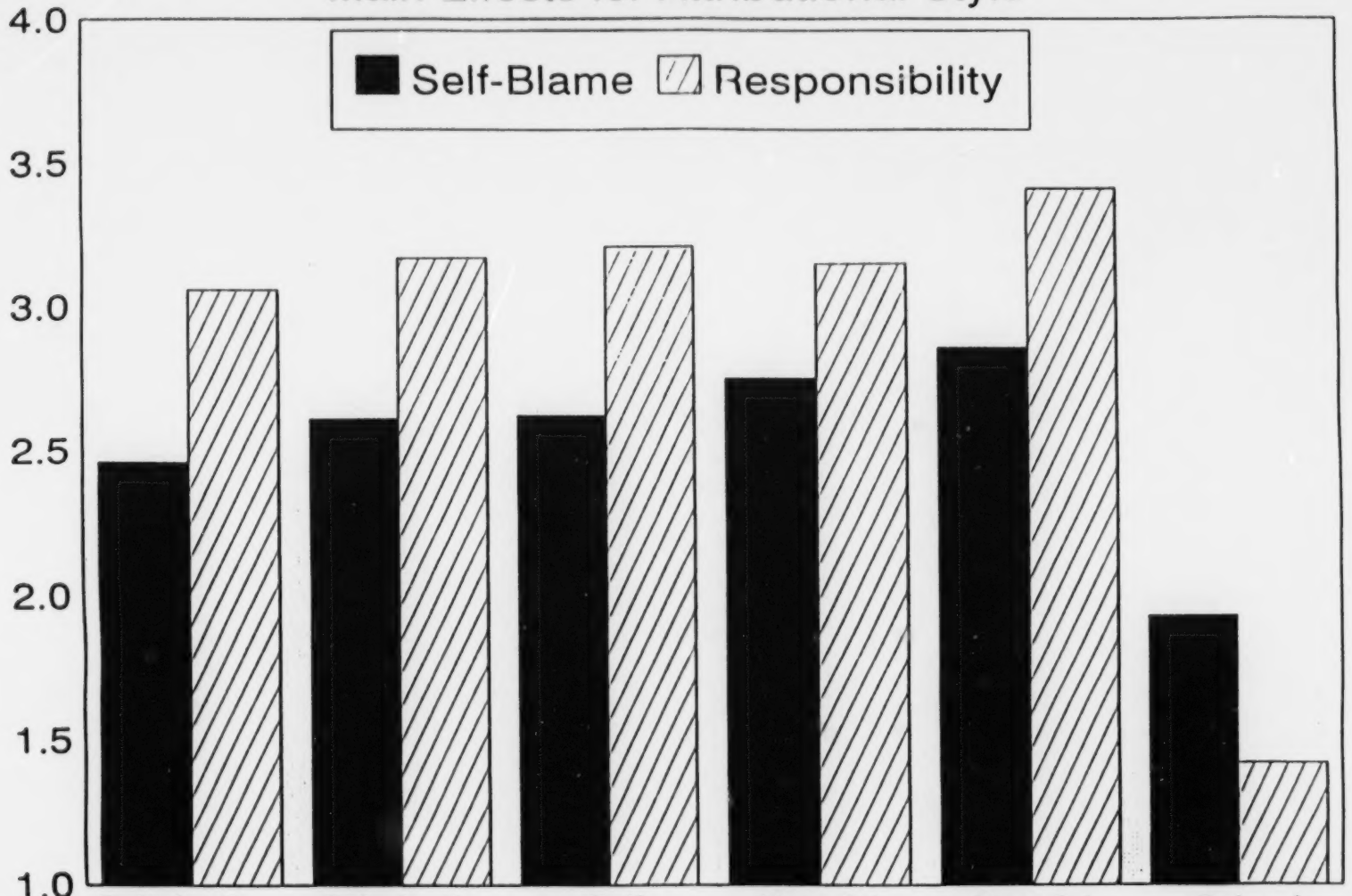


Figure 2
Main Effects for Motivational Orientation

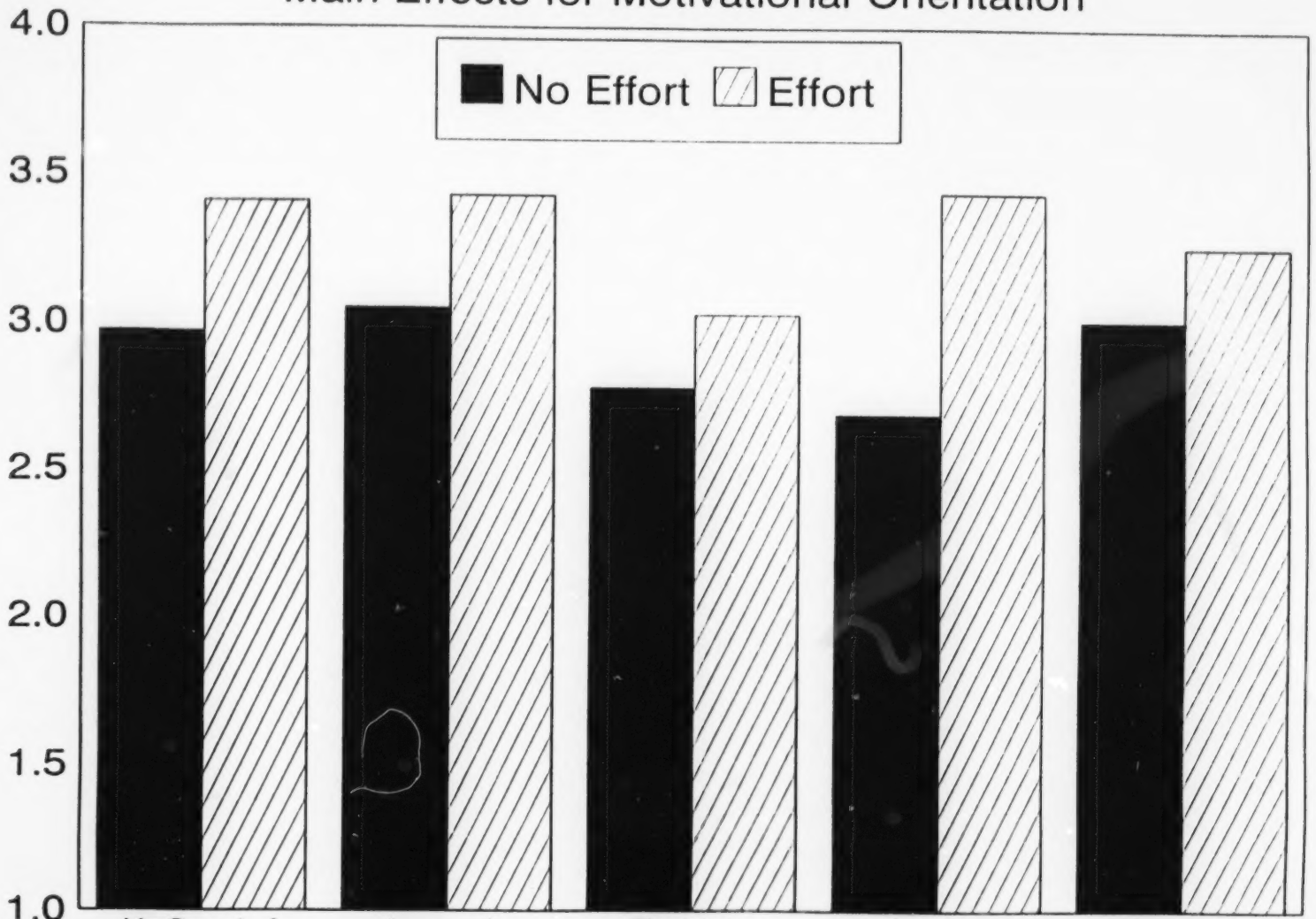
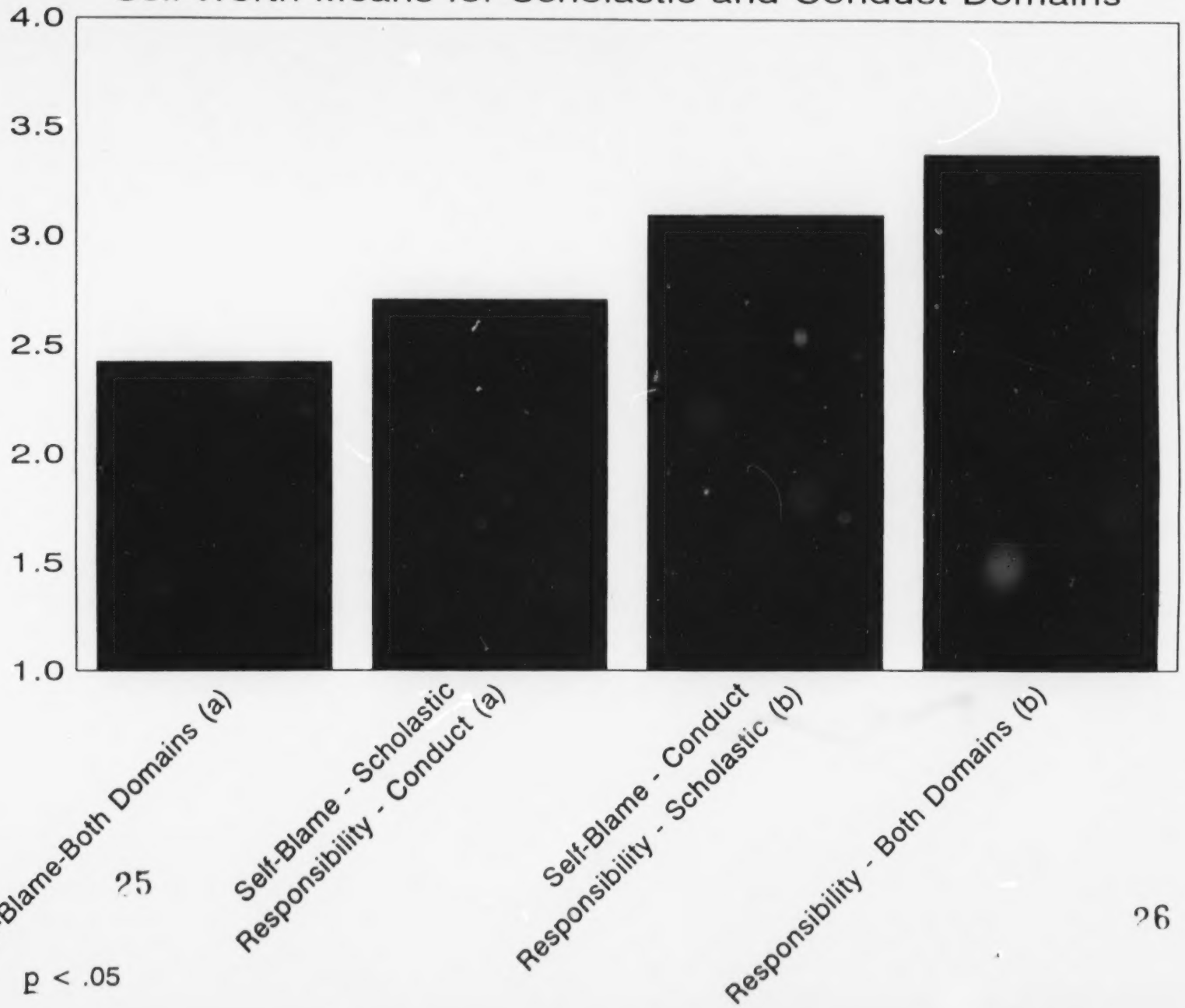


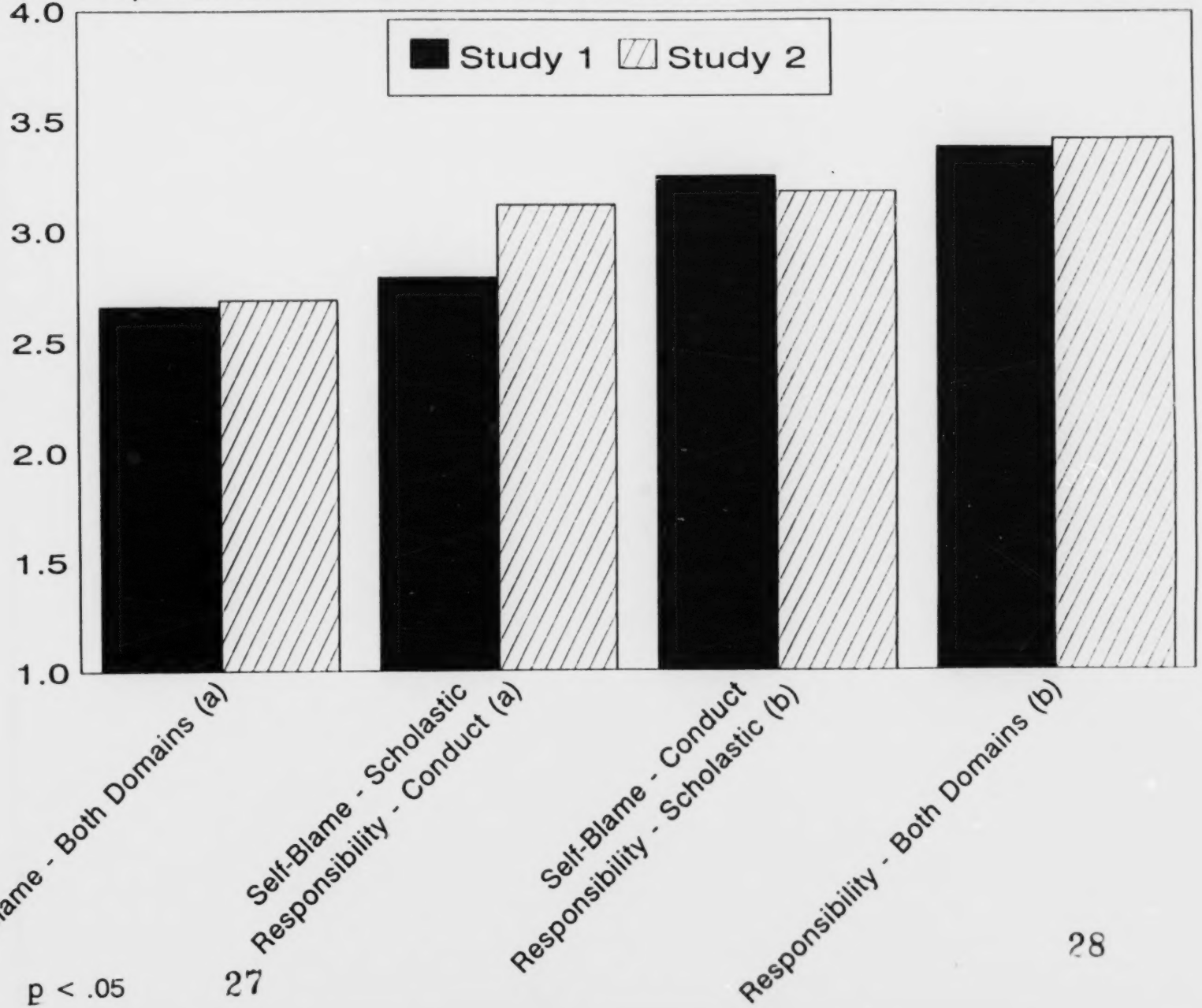
Figure 3
Self-Worth Means for Scholastic and Conduct Domains



$p < .05$

Figure 4

Hopefulness Means for Scholastic and Conduct Domains



$p < .05$